

Meeting Notes
Tenant Work Group
Tuesday, July 21, 2009
6:30-8:30pm
Executive Conference Room
101 Monroe Street
Rockville, MD 20850

Work Group Members in attendance: Matt Losak (Chair), Rick Nelson, Chuck Short, Dale Tibbitts, Felicia Eberling

Via Conference Call: Parag Khandhar, Lesa Hoover, Maureen Ross

Staff participants: Megan Moriarty, Ira Kowler, IMPACT Silver Spring; Patrice Cheatham, DHCA; Debbie Spielberg, County Council

Agenda

- Review and approve notes
- Review Committee 3 work plan
- Status updates: Committee 1 and 2
- Survey update
- Public comment

Notes:

Matt Losak called the meeting to order at 6:30pm.

Parag Khandhar reviewed Committee 3's draft recommendations (Issues 1 and 2; see attached). He will send the write-up for Issue 3 via email before the next meeting. The recommendations for Issue 1 address the need for better transmittal of information to renters. The group heard from many tenants that do not know about the resources available to them through DHCA, HOC and HHS. Another key point is that many of the materials are not available in languages other than English. Dale Tibbitts suggested that any video made for public access television could be put on the County's website as well. Parag noted that the Maryland Alliance for the Poor has been doing extended interviews with residents and he is hoping to access that data for the report. Chuck Short explained the County's plans to introduce a new 311 system in 2010 and thought it could be useful for educating renters.

Matt recommended the Committee specify that all new leaseholders should receive a Landlord-Tenant Handbook. This recommendation is included in other committee's report and should be cross-referenced in the final report.

Chuck noted that the Committee's attempts to address language access barriers should be expanded to include "those with disabilities" (blind, deaf, developmental disabilities). Harrietta Kelly mentioned that outreach could also be done to advocates for those with disabilities.

Matt suggested that a listserv run by new advocacy organization could be helpful with information dissemination to renters. Maureen Ross expressed reservations that seniors are not going to sign up for e-bulletins.

Parag discussed Issue 2, noting that there is no County-wide structure to support tenants, not even a coalition. He described various advocacy structures across the nation, including the District of Columbia. The Work Group then had a discussion on potential forms for a tenant advocacy organization in Montgomery County. Harrietta noted that the survey will also give more information about what tenant concerns an advocacy organization would need to address. Chuck cautioned the Work Group that they needed to first decide if the County needs an advocacy organization. Then, should government play that role or should it be done outside of government? Third, how can it be paid for?

Matt claimed that many renters during the public meetings expressed feelings of powerlessness when fighting landlords. DHCA is viewed as only representing landlord concerns. He wants DHCA to have a new tenant division. But because there are limits to what government can do, there should be an outside organization to advocate for tenants.

Parag described the system in DC with an advocate inside government and supporting non-profits. Rick Nelson said there are changes that can be made in the government; there are a variety of options available - different ways to get to same end goals.

Chuck recommended the Work Group re-structure the current office of OLTA. The quasi-judicial and tenant advocacy functions would be separated. Additionally, the County would adequately resource advocacy via non-profits. Rick claimed these changes could be made without legislative approval. They just require modifying how DHCA approaches its functions. The agency needs to ensure that the advocacy and information are available.

Parag wondered if the County had a renter information center at court, similar to the system in DC. It would be run by bar association, for renters and landlords. Chuck said that no system like that currently exists in the County.

Maureen stated that renters do not need an advocate in the County, but rather one like AOBA that is outside of the government and not reliant on local officials. Matt agreed that the County needed a more tenant-focused OLTA and an outside advocacy entity.

General agreement among the Work Group as to the structure of a tenant advocacy recommendation: New and visible tenant advocacy structure/function while urging the County to continue to invest in the private advocacy sector - both through focused grants for special populations, as well as another entity that broadly advocates for the needs of tenants. Individuals will still be able to access the County structure to deal with their specific problems (some members expressed concern about limits to existing rights of tenants).

Parag will include coalition based options in the draft recommendations. There may be some way to stitch together existing non-profits in the County. He will write up changes and submit them to the Work Group. Also, he will send specific language access concerns before next meeting.

Megan reported the survey will be mailed out this week. Dale, Alice and Matt will arrange a call to view the web interface of the survey.

The senior work group will meet this week and will have a report to the group by Friday and will present at the next meeting.

Rick warned that the group needs to think about costs associated with all the recommendations. These concerns should be discussed at an upcoming meeting.

The work group set the next meeting dates: Aug. 4, Aug. 18.

Matt adjourned the meeting at 8:30pm.

Upcoming Work Group Meetings:

Tuesday, August 4, 6:30pm, County Executive's conference room

Tuesday, August 18, 6:30pm, County Executive's conference room